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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KHARTOUM 001371

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR A/S FRAZER, S/E WILLIAMSON, AND AF/SPG
NSC FOR PITTMAN AND HUDSON
ADDIS ABABA ALSO FOR USAU

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR MOPS KPKO UN AU SU

SUBJECT: MINNAWI: GOS OPERATIONS IN NORTH DARFUR ARE A DECLARATION OF WAR

REF: KHARTOUM 1360

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Classified By: CDA Alberto M. Fernandez, Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On September 7, SLM Chairman and Senior Presidential Assistant Minni Minnawi told poloff that he considers GoS military operations in North Darfur to be a declaration of war. Minnawi specifically cited combined SAF, Arab militia, and janjaweed deployment surrounding SLM/MM controlled areas and the ongoing surveillance of SAF aircrafts over his positions as forms of provocation and harassment. Minnawi confidant and SLM/MM leader Bushara Hassan separately told poloff that if GoS forces travel north of Birmaza, Minnawi will formally withdraw from the government and authorize combat operations against the GoS.
END SUMMARY.

GOS OPERATIONS ARE A DECLARATION OF WAR

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¶2. (C) On September 7, at approximately 17:00 local time Senior Presidential Assistant and SLM Chairman Minni Minnawi contacted poloff from Darfur and stated that although there has not been an exchange of fire between his men and GoS forces, he considers GoS deployment surrounding his areas of control to be a declaration of war. Minnawi stated that GoS forces did fire distant and isolated shots at his troops after an attack on SLM/Unity, but that his men were strictly ordered not to return fire. Minnawi added that during September 6 and 7, Antonovs and other aircrafts have been circling his positions for hours at a time. He considers this to be both military surveillance and a form of direct harassment. "They are testing me and they want me to make the first move," stated Minnawi.

¶3. (C) Minnawi stated that the majority of fighting on September 6 and 7, contrary to earlier reports, was primarily in areas controlled by SLA/Unity and "other smaller movements that I can't name on this phone." (Note: Minnawi and his SLM colleagues believe (probably correctly) that the Sudatel cellular network is monitored by NISS. Minnawi was likely referring to movements later referenced by Bushara Hassan as in para 6. End Note.) Minnawi called the GoS operation a "big campaign" internationally designed to take land close to areas of SLM/MM control. Minnawi stated that these military operations, along with inflammatory comments from senior GoS officials against his movement, are a form of extreme harrasment. (According to Minnawi, North Darfur Governor Yousif Kibir described SLM Vice chairman Dr. Rayah Mahmud and

General Secretary Mustafa Tirab as the legitimate leaders of SLM in Minnawi's extended absence in the field.) "They want to keep putting pressure on me and my movement until we break and attack them," stated Minnawi.

¶4. (C) Minnawi asserted that he has no direct channels of communication with senior GoS officials. He also stated that the weather in North Darfur has facilitated GoS operations, as there has been no rain in his areas for over one week. Minnawi added that during the last two days of fighting, he has been in communication with many different commanders (from SLM/Unity, URF, and other movements,) but that many of the commanders are disorganized and "it is difficult to identify who they are working for, as they are all field commanders of similar levels with little control." Minnawi stated that he has not yet received trustworthy reports of the number of dead, wounded, and displaced from the fighting, but stated that some IDPS have started to flee north into his current location near Muzbat.

SLM CONFIDANT: IF SAF MOVES ANY FARTHER NORTH, WE WILL START THE FIGHT

¶5. (C) Also on September 7, Minnawi confidante and SLM Director of Capacity and Party Building, Bushara Hassan, told poloff that Minnawi has prepared his troops, taken a defensive position outside of Muzbat, and declared to SLM insiders and commanders that he will authorize attacks on GoS forces if SAF/janjaweed forces move north of Birmaza. Hassan emphasized that the fighting on September 6 and 7 occurred in areas controlled by non-signatory rebel movements, but as "there are not any non-signatories north of Birmaza, if they go past that line, they will be coming after us."

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ONE VERSION OF FIGHTING

¶6. (C) According to Hassan, the fighting on September 6 started between a small SLM/Unity force commanded by Siddig Bora, loyal to Unity's Sharif Harir (currently residing in Norway). According to Hassan's "reliable sources in the field," a combined SAF-militia force attacked and destroyed four of Bora's technicals in Birmaza. Bora responded by calling up more of his forces outside of the town, forcing the GoS force to withdraw. Hassan added that most of the fighting has been between forces commanded by Ali Karbino, Salah Jok, and Adam Bakhit, whose combined forces have a total of approximately 35 vehicles. Hassan said that there has been some cooperation between URF and Unity, particularly in the form of URF's Bahr Abu Gharda strategic coordination with Ali Karbino. Hassan stated that Karbino's forces, loyal primarily to Unity's Suliman Jamous, have the most significant force and over half of the vehicles. Hassan stated that these forces are now assembling in Om Marahig and will soon stage a major attack on GoS positions, currently in retreat near the hilly area of Gorgo Jongi outside of Birmaza.

MINNAWI PREPARED FOR A FIGHT

¶7. (C) Hassan alleged that the GoS is building up to a large-scale attack on SLM/MM. "The GoS is starting with the small signatories and deploying their troops and equipment around our areas," noted Hassan. Hassan claimed that the real target for the GoS is SLM/MM, and emphasized that GoS forces traveling from Birmaza could reach Mozbart in approximately two hours. According to Hassan, Minnawi has left the northern village of Mozbart and is currently with a small contingent of his elite commanders in a secure location. Minnawi has alerted his forces, particularly a strong force of over 40 technicals near Tabit commanded by Ahmed Abu Diggin and Mohamed Shaim. Another group of 80 SLM/MM technicals is prepared at another undisclosed location, stated Hassan.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FIGHTING AND COORDINATION WITH OTHER MOVEMENTS

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¶ 18. (C) When queried about his overall assessment of this fighting and its potential threat to SLM/MM, Hassan responded that the fighting is "very significant and more important to us than it is to the non-signatories." Hassan said that this conflict also serves the interests of the non-signatories more than SLM/MM, as these forces want to see Minnawi return to the fight. Hassan stated that extremists in the NCP (such as Presidential Assistant Nafie Ali Nafie, NISS Chief Salah Gosh, and Minister of Defense Abdul Rahman Hussein) are using the attacks to preempt a political solution to Darfur led by more moderate actors in the regime. Hassan stated that the next 72 hours could decide whether Minnawi stays in the Government or formally withdraws and returns to the fight. If Minnawi withdraws, stated Hassan, SLM/MM will formalize its strategic alliance with other rebel movements, first SLM/Unity, and possibly later JEM. Hassan stated that SLM/MM coordination with Arab movements has developed, naming Yassin Yousif and Mustafa Jumeil as two potential Arab allies for their movement. When asked about Anwar Khatir (reftel) Hassan stated that there has been some coordination between him and SLM/MM. He stated that "our latest intelligence tells us that Khatir will be leaving for Zalingei this week and that he could be a strategic partner for us in the future." (Note: Khatir separately told poloff that he would be leaving for Zalingei on September 10. End Note.)

CONCERN OVER MINNAWI'S HEALTH

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¶ 19. (C) Hassan expressed concern over Minnawi's health, specifically naming "his ongoing stomach problems" as particularly troubling. Hassan noted that Minnawi smokes excessively, eats very little, and drinks too much tea. Hassan added that Minnawi needs medical treatment in the West and hoped the U.S. could facilitate his travel. Poloff expressed concern that upon leaving the country, SLM/MM could disintegrate or be hijacked by Minnawi's rivals. Hassan responded that the most likely outcome to Minnawi's absence would be a decision by the field commanders to attack GoS forces. "Minnawi has shown great restraint and kept his commanders in line, but if he left, we might go back to war immediately," stated Hassan. Hassan urged poloff to be

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discrete about Minnawi's fragile health and to not discuss it openly with the SLM chairman. Hassan ended the meeting urging a direct call from A/S Frazer or SE Williamson to Minnawi in the field, "as we need political support for the movement at this difficult time and we need you to deliver a message to the NCP on our behalf." CDA Fernandez later spoke to Minnawi to give him his best wishes.

COMMENT

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¶ 10. (C) For months, Minnawi has told U.S. officials that he is "considering other options," and it appears that he may now be moving closer to executing that decision. SLM/MM's claim that the GoS is intentionally trying to provoke his movement may have some truth to it, especially as this fighting was unexpected in the middle of the rainy season, during the holy month of Ramadan, and following SLM/Unity's acceptance of UNAMID's proposed truce. The GOS is claiming privately that it is responding directly to a request from WFP and UNAMID to help clear out bandits preying on food convoys that threaten 450,000 at risk people. (SLM/Free Will's Eisa Beisa, whose movement has at times violently clashed with SLM/MM, also separately stated that the GoS is harassing and testing Minnawi through its current operation.) Hassan grew excited when discussing SLM/MM military plans and Minnawi sounded very anxious on September 7. Although Minnawi has shown great restraint since returning to the field, it now appears as if only the slightest move by the GoS could provoke a new military phase for Minnawi, the final

death sentence of the DPA, and the formation of new rebel alliances.

FERNANDEZ